

THE CROSSING

A DEVON WEST MYSTERY

BOOK ONE

Oliver Dean Spencer



ORIGINAL
PRESS

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THE CROSSING



The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves

— William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

01

There's been no mistake," she countered, throwing in one of her crocodile smiles for good measure. "We keep meticulous records. The problem must lie elsewhere."

"What about a system hack?" I asked.

"Our servers are redundant and behind a firewall," she further countered—her steely, blue eyes, now trying to punch holes through my accusations. "And they're updated with the latest software. So, any possibility that a hack, glitch or virus may have altered the file is also out of the question."

"I see."

But I didn't.

We both knew she was pushing the company's doublespeak.

No one system was that secure, especially if an insider hacked it.

But I decided to not push the issue for the moment. I had something else in mind.

"Will that be all, Mr. West."

"... um ... oh, yes. There is one last thing. Do you have a Mike Evans working here?"

This last question took her off guard.

"Ah, who?"

"Mike Evans."

"No. Not that I'm aware of," she answered a bit too quickly. "But then again," she pushed on, "we have over two hundred employees worldwide.

She gave me a long hard look, trying to gauge my reaction to her suspect answer.

I didn't say anything.

I just stared back.

Finally, she begrudgingly reached over to her intercom, pressing one of a dozen buttons.

A voice responded almost immediately.

"Yes, Ms. Daniels."

"Could you come in here a moment."

A woman in her late twenties, outfitted in a neat, navy blue cotton blazer, and matching pants, offset by a stark white blouse, entered.

She carried a stern, expressionless face—her bleached blond hair pulled up into a bun, except for the few strands that had escaped their captivity, now fronting her speckled, hazel-green eyes.

Stopping only inches from where I sat and without giving me a second thought, asked, “did you needed something, Ms. Daniels?”

"Yes. Can you have Human Resources do a check for a... I'm sorry," turning back to me, "what was that name?"

I wasn't buying into her absent-mindedness and found it curious that she would be pushing it.

"Evans, his name is Mike Evans."

"Yes. That's right. Mike Evans. Have HR dig up whatever they can on this Evans and have a printout ready for Mr. West before he leaves."

“Right away, Ms. Daniels.” she said, turning and exiting as eagerly and silently as when she had first appeared.

My curiosity was piqued.

There seemed something familiar about her, but I couldn't quite place it.

I followed her exit with a long stare.

"Will there be anything else, Mr. West?" Daniels demanded, vying for my attention again.

"Ah, yes... I mean, no. That covers it. Thank you so much for your time."

"You will make sure that all parties concerned know that we cooperated fully?"

"Of course."

And with that she lowered her head, feigning a great interest in certain papers on her desk—making it clear my presence was no longer warranted.

I, in turn, took a moment to study her.

I reckoned she was in her mid-forties, a career professional and exceptionally good at her job.

I figured she believed the hype her company stood for and would go down fighting if need be.

The fact she earned six figures for such loyalty helped.

As I got up to leave, I considered telling her to have a wonderful day but thought better of it—the gesture would be lost on her.

I expected to run into Ms. Andrews, on my way out, but she was nowhere in sight.

Neither were the files I had asked for.

Once outside, I took a glance back toward the twenty-ninth floor, where my encounter with Ms. Daniels took place.

Hope Industries made up the top three floors of a thirty-story high rise located in the business sector of Montreal.

I hated skyscrapers, on account I suffered from vertigo.

But it also had to do with my preference of having my feet planted firmly on the ground—knowing where I stood.

The streets were where I grew up—surrounded by its smells, its dirt, and the grind of everyday living.

Up there, in Daniel's office, I felt a disconnect, as if someone was performing surgery on my soul—trying to extract any remaining traces of my humanity.

It was ironic that I should feel that way in a place named after one of the seven virtues.

02

Carl Henderson had hired me to track down his daughter, who'd gone missing.

He explained he'd exhausted all the usual avenues trying to locate her, including local and federal authorities.

They all told him the same thing: *she's an adult, and since there's no sign of foul play, their hands were tied.*

“What they're saying is true, Mr. Henderson,” I said, concurring with what the authorities told him. “Without any evidence of a crime being committed, they really can't act on it.”

“But you do think something's happened to my Stephanie? Don't you Mr. West?”

“I didn't say that. I really don't have all the facts.”

“But you and I both know there’s a strong possibility,” he insisted, with a hint of desperation in his voice.

I needed to steer Henderson away from the obvious conclusion of where our conversation was heading.

I paused a beat before answering, reflecting on the man before me.

I pegged Henderson to be around fifty and knew he had made his money in real estate. He was worth somewhere in the neighbourhood of twenty mil.

In his prime he must have been an imposing figure, one to reckon with.

But what confronted me now, was a broken man.

Someone who would give up his kingdom for his daughter’s return.

His wife died three years back, leaving only him and his daughter, which I sensed made him overprotective—the way he’d check on her every move.

Not that that was a terrible thing.

Most parents wouldn’t think twice about their grown kid’s absence, until weeks or months later.

When Henderson first contacted me, my first thought was kidnapping.

But no ransom call ever came.

The fact that no one had heard from her for over two weeks, including friends and work associates, was a cause for concern irrelevant to what the authorities thought—it just didn't fit her outgoing and social profile.

I figured I owed it to Henderson, to find out the truth.

“Tell me a bit more about Stephanie and the circumstances leading up to her disappearance.” I finally asked.

“Well, Steph just turned twenty-four when she was hired by Hope Industries as a financial consultant back in February.”

“So that was about six months ago?” I asked, wanting to have a clear timeline in my head.

“Yes, February 15, to be exact.”

“OK, go on.”

“Well, they told her she'd be overseeing donations made to their charities overseas, specifically throughout the Middle East and Africa.”

“Do you know what kind of charities they were?”

“No idea. I assumed they were Christian based, that the money collected would go toward food, clothing, and medical supplies. You know, she was really excited about this job since it also involved traveling.”

Henderson took a moment to reflect on this fading visage of his daughter.

It was the only time I ever saw him smile.

Seeing that I was still there, reality set back in along with his melancholy.

Putting on a brave face, he pushed on with his story.

“I only learned of her trip the day before she left. She said she’d be gone for only a few days. Of course, I demanded she call me the moment she arrived. But she never did.”

“Then how do you know she arrived?”

“Well, when she never called, I became worried and contacted the hotel she was to stay at. They told me she had indeed checked in. I continued to place numerous calls to her suite but got no answer. So, I decided to fly there myself to see what was going on.”

“And?”

“And the hotel detective told me the records showed her checking in and out, as per her reservations. The on-duty desk clerk at the time identified her as my daughter based on the photo I brought.”

“Did anyone else see her?”

“No.”

“Then what did you do?”

“I then contacted local authorities who told me there wasn’t much they could do. They assured me she was most likely on a plane back to Montreal, and that I’d find her waiting for me when I got back.”

“But you never did.”

“No. I know they thought she was having a fling with a local. I could see it in their faces. They just weren’t taking me seriously.”

“And would she have?” I asked, knowing this would upset him.

“Of course not. Stephanie’s a romantic at heart. She was looking for the right person, wanting to settle down. And she’d just started a relationship with a fellow colleague.”

“Who’s that?”

“His name is Mike Evans. He worked in the tech department at Hope Industries.”

“And you say he’s missing as well.”

“Yes. I did talk to him once after Steph’s disappearance, hoping she had at least contacted him. But she hadn’t. Then I tried him a week later to see if maybe he had heard something and left several messages on his answering machine. But got no answer. So, I called Hope Industries to see if I could reach him there. But nothing. He seems to have vanished just like Steph.”

“Do you think he may have had something to do with Stephanie’s disappearance?”

“Hard to believe he’s not connected in some way. But not as a personal threat to her. I pride myself as an excellent judge of character. Mike would not have hurt Steph in any way. He adored her.”

“And the cops didn’t find any of this strange? They didn’t follow up on any of your concerns?”

“Well, they told me they would follow up on it, but whenever I called, they kept telling me the same bullshit—there was nothing to report. Again, as with the authorities in Cairo, I didn’t think they were taking her disappearance seriously. So, that’s when I finally decided to call you.”

“Was Stephanie using drugs?”

“No. Never. She didn’t even drink for Christ’s sake.”

I let Henderson’s last claim about his daughter sink in, knowing it was always difficult to get straight answers from a client.

Not that they didn’t want to.

But Henderson couldn’t know everything that Stephanie did or thought.

Kids tended to hold things back about their personal life, especially when it came to their parents—concerned about what they’d think or how they’d react.

I mentioned this fact to him, and he agreed that he couldn't know everything about her.

But said he'd never had an occasion to doubt her.

Henderson had wanted me to fly to Cairo and see what I could find out.

I told him that would be premature, that I'd prefer to start locally, gathering all the facts, see where they led.

"If you think that's for the best," he conceded, followed by a long, slow sigh—signaling he'd decided to resign his fate and that of his daughter's into my hands.

"I do," I replied, in the most comforting voice I could muster.

Henderson had cupped his face with the palms of his hands. trying desperately to hold back his grief and tears.

I figured it was time to leave, dreading the day I'd have to return to break the tragic news of his daughter's death.

I'd already calculated the odds of her still being alive.

They were slim to none.

END OF PREVIEW